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## CHRISTIAN HIP-HOP: A GENERATION'S WORDS

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### SYNOPSIS

Hip-hop has an incredible built-in potential to be used as a vehicle to herald the gospel, teach doctrine, and lead people in the worship and praise of the Creator of all things. Since the late 1980s, many have used it as a tool to do just that. A term for a new category of music and ministry, *Christian hip-hop* (CHH), was coined. As with many aspects of Christian culture, there is a division regarding the necessity and relevance of CHH, but even many of its supporters see that popular CHH is beginning to move away from the biblical principles that not only gave it liberty but also power and philosophical grounding.

Over the past thirty years, CHH has faced major challenges ranging from the hostility of a hip-hop community that allowed for everything and everyone except for Jesus to the suspicions of a church at large that questioned whether hip-hop could ever be anything but worldly and demonic. CHH has survived its oxymoronic birth and reserved a place (though a troubled one) in the urban ministry landscape. Its various movements, from the Cross Movement to the more current and prevailing 116 Movement (Rom. 1:16), have rekindled an old controversy familiar to those aware of discussions regarding “cultural engagement” by the church.

Ultimately, the questions orbit around whether or not hip-hop is a perfect capsule for carrying the gospel and biblical information simply based on its structure and its various creeds (keep it real; be unashamed and unapologetic). Furthermore,

does the minister or the artist intent on using hip-hop to reach the world and/or to edify the church need to anchor his ministry philosophy or art to the timeless principles found in the Bible? Or is it more important to pursue relevance, art excellence, and mutual respect from the culture and the industry as a means of reaching those otherwise unconcerned with Christian hip-hop?

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“You watch a generation’s *words*, and you will find out what they are doing with *reality*. Are we calling God a liar? All the wickedness in the world that we see starts off from one fundamental principle, choosing to call God a liar. Wickedness is the natural outworking of believing a lie. Goodness is the natural outworking of believing the truth. If you’re a good man sir, if you’re a good woman ma’am, it is because you are believing the truth. And if you are an evil person, it is because you are living with a lie. It is as simple as that, but as catastrophic” (emphasis in original). — Ravi Zacharias<sup>1</sup>

“A poet’s mission is to make words do more work than they normally do, to make them work on more than one level.” —Jay Z<sup>2</sup>

## THE POWER OF WORDS

Words are arguably the most powerful instrument at human disposal. In the hands of gifted writers, carefully selected, strategically arranged words are particularly impactful. Songs that combine evocative music with powerful lyrics seem to up the ante. For many intent listeners, this concept is nowhere more evident than in hip-hop. Undoubtedly, its words have been its most prized possession. As hip-hop has grown from infancy to adulthood, many have been encouraged by its extraordinary ability to encapsulate the hopes of the marginalized. Others have capitalized on its ability to tap felt needs and reflect innate concerns. At the same time, it has facilitated the aspirations of both the talented and the greedy and irreligious. Despite this, many of us believe that God has given man the gift of music for the *primary* purpose of worshiping Him, giving thanks, and encouraging others (Eph. 5:19–21; Col. 3:16–17 ESV). As we realize music’s power and effectiveness as a tool of ministry, especially hip-hop music, it all begins to read like the perfect means for those who live among this culture as a remnant with a remedy.

Because hip-hop is not only a form of music but also a culture, its followers struggle with what it actually looks like for the body of Christ to “engage culture.” The ultimate hope is that God would use those indigenous to hip-hop to baptize, teach, and make disciples (Matt. 28:19–20) inside this culture. It is Christian hip-hop (CHH)—often unappreciated, virtually unknown, and pitifully underestimated—that has the capacity to galvanize the people immersed in hip-hop culture. CHH’s history, its theological struggles, and its missiological potential challenge the followers of Christ and the world to pay attention to what God has done and may still want to do with it. In the meantime, its major strength is in its audacity to believe that a hostile, indifferent, and cynical world actually can be reached for Christ by putting all the weight on one tool: words.

### **WORDS OF ORIGIN: SECULAR HIP-HOP**

For those who are unfamiliar with hip-hop’s origin, it emerged during the 1970s in the Bronx borough of New York City, represented by four foundational elements: rapping, DJ’ing, breakdancing, and graffiti. The rapping (words) element, later to become a notable genre of music, has from its early stages dominated over the other elements and also has set forth some astounding principles. In fact, hip-hop started as an outlet for disenfranchised African and Latino Americans, with the rap or MC (Emcee) portion becoming the major tool of expression and communication for those who otherwise had no real voice in American society. Clive Campbell, aka DJ Kool Herc, has been noted as one of the forefathers of hip-hop. “Hip-hop is the voice of this generation. Even if you didn’t grow up in the Bronx in the ’70s, hip-hop is there for you. It has become a powerful force. Hip-hop binds all of these people, all of these nationalities, all over the world together.”<sup>3</sup>

With far too many artists to mention, there were a few iconic names that fueled this sensation: Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five, Afrika Bambaataa, Kurtis Blow and the Sugar Hill Gang (who released a song called “Rapper’s Delight,” which is credited as one of the first hip-hop records to become a radio hit), Rakim, Run DMC, Public Enemy, NWA, A Tribe Called Quest, Tupac, Biggie Smalls, and Wu-Tang Clan helped give theme music to this culture during its middle years. Currently, hip-hop music has climbed to the status of pop music with the likes of crossover, multimillionaire superstars such as Jay Z, Kanye West, Eminem, Lil Wayne, Nicki Minaj, and Drake.

### **WORDS OF ORIGIN: CHRISTIAN HIP-HOP**

While there is a preponderance of material on secular hip-hop's beginnings, CHH's story takes some digging. First, in an article titled "Beats, Rhymes and Bibles: An Introduction to Gospel Hip-Hop," Josef Sorett explains, "While Gospel-Blues had Thomas Dorsey and contemporary Gospel had Tremaine Hawkins, Gospel Hip Hop has Stephen Wiley, the unsung original Christian MC. In 1985, six years after the release of *Rapper's Delight*, Wiley debuted with *Bible Break*, the first commercially-released Christian rap song"<sup>4</sup> (sic). A few years after the release, CHH made its way back east to the genre's birth state of New York with a musical release from another genre pioneer by the name of Michael Peace, who made his debut in 1987 with a song called "Rrrock It Right." Chris Cooper, aka Sup The Chemist (of the group SFC), is also one of the genre's earliest and most influential forefathers.

Other respected interview sources state that while Wiley and Peace may have beat everyone to the punch in terms of making the first recordings, there were small pockets of Christian hip-hop developing all over the country unbeknownst to one another.

Though there are too many contributors to mention in full, some of the names that laid a foundation for music ministry of this type were SFC, Dynamic Twins, PID, T-Bone, and IDOL King. In the years following, as CHH became more accepted in church circles, groups like D.C. Talk and POD saw tremendous mainstream recognition of their albums' releases. In addition, names such as The Tunnel Rats, The G.R.I.T.S., Grapetree Records, The Cross Movement, The Ambassador, Da Truth, Flame, Lamp Mode Recording, Humble Beast, Reach Records, Lecrae, Trip Lee, and Andy Mineo are just a few that have become staples in this niche genre.

Undoubtedly, most today would declare Lecrae as the most well-known and illustrious Christian hip-hop artist of all time. Moreover, with Grammy Awards, national television appearances (*The Tonight Show* and *Good Morning America*), #1 Billboard Top 200 charting, and an extensive touring schedule to his credit, Lecrae has shattered any glass ceilings that may have existed for an artist of his type. However, he has also become a controversial figurehead among CHH circles because of a recent change in how he identifies himself. Lecrae now says that he is an artist that just happens to be a Christian and in keeping with this, there is a notable change in his approach to his music and his ministry.

"He is bigger than his own label, he is bigger than everyone on his label. At this point Lecrae is the key player, so much so that most publications don't even know that there are other Christian rappers still." Tim Trudeau made this statement during my interview with him. Tim is president of Syntax Creative, a leading name in the digital distribution and marketing of a significant amount of CHH music.

## WORDS THAT DEFINE

What is CHH? One of its most diversified gatekeepers, DJ Wade-O, told me during a phone interview:

*This question is one that I have pondered, and I think the definitions have probably changed greatly over the years. The most accurate statement that would encompass what we're doing is, hip-hop made by Christians, which has been marketed primarily to Christians. I think there was a time where the goal was different with much of the music. It was definitely a tool for evangelism and encouragement; but now I don't think that is necessarily the goal with a number of the artists. Numerous people are like, "man, I just want to say what's on my heart," and I don't know if that is a good or a bad thing to be honest. I've kind of gone back and forth on that.*

This sets a perfect table for understanding holy hip-hop's most historical and controversial divide, so much so that currently almost everyone I've interviewed struggled to answer this question in terms of his own definition versus what a unified definition would be for the genre/ministry in general. However, having a clear understanding regarding the purpose and approach to CHH is vitally important, mainly due to its ministry potential and its example for the generation following.

William Branch, aka The Ambassador, who is currently in the PhD program and also adjunct professor at Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina (also cofounder of the Cross Movement and cofounder of Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia), is one of the foremost voices in the arena of urban ministry as both a scholar and a CHH artist. In a recent interview, Branch explained that CHH's divide was very similar to the divide between the First and Second Great Awakening. He went on to say, "Do we win them this way? Is the way to be good and successful because of this or that? I think that has been the divide. How you succeed and your philosophy of how you succeed. The two-sided tussle for the Christian—what it means to succeed according to hip-hop, what does it mean to succeed according to Christians? You put those two together and both of those dynamics have their own philosophical divides."

### **"Real" Words: Authenticity**

There are a few powerful principles that have always governed hip-hop. The first is the law of "keeping it real," which in essence is just the code of being authentic—having words that match and correspond with your reality. Many in CHH today have been

tempted to change their well-established overtly Christian identities in an effort to become more relevant to a world they think is in need of better art, assuming that better art alone from someone who happens to be a private Christian is a more novel or more mature missional strategy. But in actuality, we end up confirming the world's view of a pitiful God who on His own terms is weak, or one who is in desperate need of a makeover—a remodeling that will put Him in a better light—a God accepted by pop culture, respected by secular hip-hop's elite, and styled in the latest version of designer "inoffensiveness." Michael Horton in his book *Christless Christianity* quoting Ann Douglass says, "Nothing could show better the late nineteenth-century Protestant Church's altered identity as an eager participant in the emerging consumer society than its obsession with popularity and its increasing disregard of intellectual issues."<sup>5</sup> Horton follows by saying, "Across our entire cultural landscape, the only law left seems to be 'keep it light.' If we expect to reach the unchurched (in other words, sell our product to a wider market), we will have to get rid of everything with rough edges, everything that offends and puts people off."<sup>6</sup> The apostle Paul warns against this temptation in 2 Corinthians 4:1–5.

### **Words from the Heart**

The second rule is something that I believe even Jesus declared in Matthew 15:18 (ESV), where he says, "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart." Secular hip-hop has always celebrated and applauded those who have let the reality of their hearts come out of their mouths—not just in private but also when the mic is on. In fact, I don't believe I can recall one instance with any major secular hip-hop star where the main issue of their heart was nuanced and private, while more peripheral issues undergirded their careers. In fact, it has been quite the opposite. Rakim could not contain his love for Allah and the Five-Percent Nation in his music. KRS-One could not shrink back from letting knowledge be the platform for his art. Public Enemy, one of hip-hop's greatest groups, which used hip-hop as an instrument to carry their message of black empowerment, would have died before distancing themselves from Louis Farrakhan and The Nation of Islam (in the music and in the press). Could anyone imagine Tupac without his fire for "Thug Life"? We can't, because it is what made him who he was (and perhaps what also killed him). Unfortunately, there is only one group that struggles in this way, one artist who breaks this code of authenticity—it is the Christian hip-hopper. In Acts 4, we see Peter and John faced not with the threat of their careers or the popularity of their ministry at stake but their very lives. However, when commanded to make Jesus a more private proclamation in that city they vowed, "it is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20 NET).

These individuals spoke from the heart and never made apologies for speaking their minds. These days, it would seem that instead of affirming our God, we are too busy making apologies for who we really are. Romans 1:16 (NKJV), "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ," has been a great rallying call for CHH over the latter years (this is to the credit of Lecrae, Trip Lee, and the Reach Records artists). But now, many of CHH's words seem strangely distant from our reality. It feels very much as if the world has dictated to the Christian (and to God for that matter) how it prefers to be reached, and we are obliging. Horton also states, "We and our churches need to recover the fundamental presupposition that God cares for us too much to leave us to ourselves or to affirm us in our ignorance, lies, spin, and casual acceptance of the world's interpretation of reality."<sup>7</sup> As I quoted Zacharias in the beginning of the article, "Watch a generation's *words* and you will find out what they are doing with *reality*."<sup>8</sup> Over the past ten years, I have watched a generation's identity and words change to fit a reality that is possibly neither biblical nor truly liberating when honestly tested.

## THE WORD

In 1 Corinthians 1, the apostle Paul sets the stage of the Christian's reality both past and present. Before any effort of our own, it is made clear that "the message of the Cross" will be foolishness to some and the power of God to others (1 Cor. 1:18 NKJV). If our soteriology (doctrine of salvation) points us to a God that does the saving and not to our own ministry strategies (worldly wisdom), then we are freed from the stress and wasted energy of trying to take the "foolishness" out of the gospel. Faithfulness in proclamation would be our only responsibility. CHH has a grand opportunity to lead in what "cultural engagement" can look like. Hip-hop's general creeds give us that right and charge, but not without danger and threat. But such is the life of the Christian in any domain.

In conclusion, it is my desire that this short commentary will serve to whet the appetite for further discussion. There are many other issues that need to be lovingly discussed and charitably considered. My hope was to focus on not only how important words are but also how indispensable *the Word* is. Words and reality are important for our walk and for our witness. Consequently, our words and our reality must correspond. This concept is not foreign to our God, but for Him, it is inextricable. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1 ESV). This is the ultimate expression of this truth.

I believe that there is a freeing reality for those who don't see hip-hop as a tool for ministry, but art as a vocation, where artists are still duty bound to glorify God in all that they do (1 Cor. 10:31, 1 Pet. 4:11). C. S. Lewis would argue that because the

Christian worldview informs everything that the Christian does, the Lord can be honored by an artist simply creating excellent art.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, because hip-hop's art must be evaluated based on its context and some of the principles discussed earlier, the artist will be forced to at least keep those core values in mind. That being said, clarity and honesty must be the prerequisites for anyone using hip-hop as a tool of the ministry. Covert, more latent missional strategies have the potential to harm rather than help real outreach in this arena.

In conclusion, there are not many better ways to contrast the challenge that awaits the CHH minister than what Calvin Miller has so clearly stated in an excerpt from his piece "Passion or Polish":

*Jonah's sermon was powerful simply because it was not ornate. He who cries fire in a theater need not be an orator. Indeed, he is allowed to interrupt the art of actors. It is not an offense to the years of disciplined training to be set aside for the urgent and unadorned word: The theater is on fire! The bearer rates his effectiveness on how fast the theater is cleared, not on the ovation of the customers. The alarmist is not out for encores but empty seats. His business is rescue.<sup>10</sup>*

*The tendency remains. Now the zealot is a performer and the sermon a monologue celebrated for its emotional and statistical success. The burden is urgent but also entertaining. The preacher feels the burden of his word as the fire-crier feels the pain of his office. But he feels also the pleasure of its success, which is his reputation. Ego being the force it is, the urgency of the cry often becomes a secondary theme. Artistry eclipses zeal.<sup>11</sup>*

Christian Hip-Hop's kingdom contribution and cultural impact will continue to depend on its clarity of mission, its integrity to the art form, and its perspective of what biblical success really looks like in its context.

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## NOTES

- 1 Ravi Zacharias, "The Mystery of Evil and the Miracle of Life," <http://rzim.org/let-my-people-think-broadcasts/the-mystery-of-evil-and-the-miracle-of-life>.



- 2 Jay Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2010), 54.
- 3 Jeff Chang, introduction to *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, by DJ Kool Herc (New York: Picador Books, 2005), xii.
- 4 Josef Sorett, "Beats, Rhymes and Bibles: An Introduction to Gospel Hip-Hop," *African American Pulpit* (Winter 2006–2007); available at <http://www.josefsorett.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/07/beatsrhymesbiblestaap-websiteexcerpt.pdf>.
- 5 Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 245.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., 246.
- 8 Ravi Zacharias, "The Mystery of Evil and the Miracle of Life."
- 9 See David K. Naugle, "With Their Christianity Latent: C. S. Lewis on the Arts," June 3, 2012, <https://www.cslewis.com/blog/with-their-christianity-latent-c-s-lewis-on-the-arts/>.
- 10 Calvin Miller, "Passion or Polish?" in *Changing Lives through Preaching and Worship*, ed. Marshall Shelley (Nashville: Moorings, 1995), 26.
- 11 Miller, "Passion or Polish?" 8.